



My five cents...

A weekly column from Sen. Robert Nichols
by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

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This week in 1836 the Convention of 1836 adjourned abruptly as the Mexican army approached Washington-on-the-Brazos. The convention, which began on March 1, drafted the Texas Declaration of Independence and the Texas Constitution, organized the government, and named Sam Houston commander-in-chief of the military forces before the delegates had to be evacuated.

Here are five things happening around your state:

1. Texas to receive over 800,000 COVID-19 vaccine first doses

The Texas Department of State Health Services allocated over 650,000 first doses to at least 445 providers in 178 counties. An additional 200,000 first doses will be available to pharmacy locations and federally-qualified health centers. This is the third largest allocation Texas has received since December. Texas has now administered more than 7.6 million doses and more than 5 million people have received at least one dose. Over 2.7 million Texans are now fully vaccinated. Additionally, last week the department announced an expansion in eligibility for the vaccine to people 50 and older as well as teachers and child care workers. It's estimated that 12 to 14 million Texans are now eligible for the vaccine. You can find more information about vaccination hubs and providers at <https://dshs.texas.gov/coronavirus/immunize/vaccine-hubs.aspx>.

2. Broadband bill heard in Senate Transportation Committee

This week the Senate Transportation Committee, which I chair, heard Senate Bill 5. I filed this bill as an important step toward expanding broadband access statewide. During the hearing, 89 witnesses signed up to testify. Not one of them testified against this bill. It just goes to show how important this legislation is to the people of Texas and how committed we are to establishing the Texas Broadband Office that will do vital work connecting Texas. While we're still working out some of the specifics of the bill, I'm confident the committee will vote on it soon and send it for consideration before the entire Senate. I am also very proud to work with Rep. Trent Ashby in the House, who is carrying House Bill 5, a very similar bill to my Senate Bill 5. He is having a

hearing on HB 5 this week. Ensuring Texans have access to high-quality broadband internet is imperative as we move into an increasingly digital world.

3. DETCOG, other East Texas counties receive GLO flood mitigation funding

The Texas General Land Office approved over \$135 million in the second round of flood mitigation grants. There were 21 grantees in this round and seven of those were in Senate District 3. The Deep East Texas Council of Government, Jasper County, Newton, Newton County, San Augustine County, Tenaha, and Zavalla were all granted funds for a wide range of flood abatement projects. The grants ranged in size from \$3.6 million to over \$9.5 million and total over \$32 million for the region. These funds will be essential for building projects that would protect communities and critical infrastructure against future damage from hurricanes, flooding, and other natural disasters. Protecting our coastal communities and communities with high flood risks is important for safety and disaster preparedness.

4. Nine million dollars awarded for North Newton County broadband project

The Deep East Texas Council of Government received a \$9.09 million grant from the General Land Office for its North Newton County Broadband Project. The project will focus on building a rural broadband network in northern Newton County, an area where broadband access is lacking. DETCOG has also applied for a larger grant from GLO which, if approved, would allow the agency to construct a rural broadband network in all 12 of its member counties. Currently, DETCOG is working out the details for the Newton County project. DETCOG began its broadband initiative three years ago, so they are prepared to go to work with engineering and grants management teams already in place. While it will take some time to get broadband deployed, I'm excited about this project and the prospects for the future of East Texas.

5. Texas State Parks returning to full capacity

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department announced they're working on a strategic plan to open all State Parks back to full capacity. Most State Parks closed or had limited capacity for the last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, with Governor Abbott lifting capacity limits in his reopening order, TPWD is looking forward to welcoming Texans back to enjoy the great outdoors. All restrictions on group sizes have been lifted. However, TPWD is encouraging visitors to wear masks, especially when indoors or in areas where it is difficult to socially distance.

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